Book Review: Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife by Raiford Guins

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In **Game After, Raiford Guins** looks closely at video games as museum objects, engaging with curatorial and archival practices across a range of cultural institutions. Chapters cover museums dedicated to the medium, the vast landfills that housed unwanted video games, and the popularity of vintage game superstores. **Alison Gazzard** finds that the author's multi-disciplinary approach to studying the after life of games makes this book suitable for a wide audience: cultural institutions, historians and curators; those who collect, cherish, and restore digital content in less formal settings; and media, cultural, and game studies scholars.

Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife. Raiford Guins. MIT Press. January 2014.

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Video games are part of a collection of growing media forms falling into the category of 'born digital content'. These digital artefacts, although relatively recent cultural forms, are the subjects of increasing interest as to how and why they should be preserved. The history and preservation of computer games outside of the academy and cultural institutions often provokes a raised eyebrow by those questioning not only the validity of these popular culture artefacts as a field of study but as to whether these objects are even old enough to warrant preservation efforts.

Yet as Raiford Guins examines throughout *Game After: A Cultural Study of the Video Game Afterlife*, video games exist in a variety of ways: as lines of code, as material objects, as played experiences, as social spaces, as collections, as landfill, and beyond. Going beyond player nostalgia and re-tellings of generic game histories, Guins instead focuses on the processes and problems associated with not only telling game histories but also finding and maintaining the archives that might hold the keys to revealing them. His continuing mantra throughout the book is that not only do videogames present themselves in a myriad of ways, so too do the processes that construct their existence. Rather than provide a one size fits all remedy for the preservation, collection, curation, and interpretation of video game histories, *Game After* presents these multiple facets surrounding what Guins terms the "afterlife" of video games through distinct case studies at the heart of each chapter.
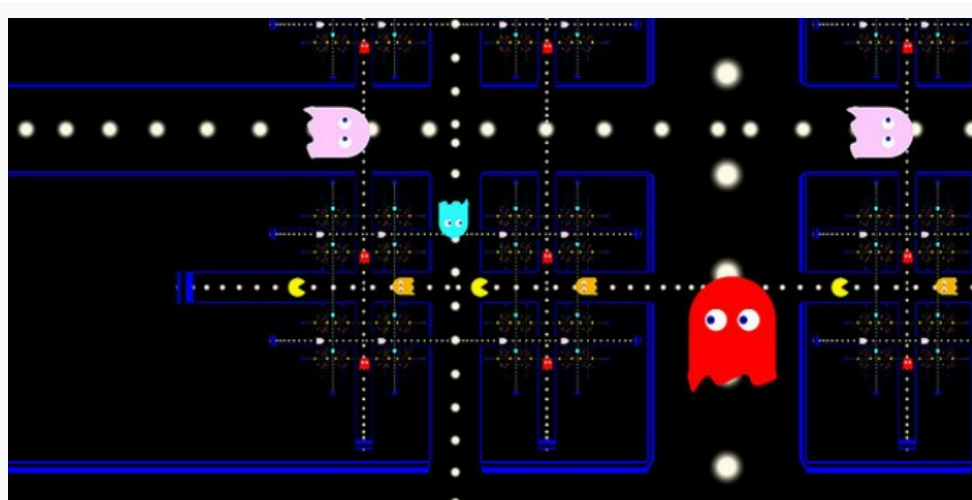
Whilst each chapter reveals another set of issues for scholars researching games histories, cultural institutions curating video games, and the role of game collectors in aiding video game research, the reader is transported to each new site of enquiry across the North American landscape; from the Vintage Arcade Superstore that sparked Guins' initial curiosity for the book, to the Museum of the Moving Image, from interviews with lead curators, to artists such as Chris Spohn who illustrated the box art for a range of Atari VCS titles. For Guins these visits are not luxuries of the research process but instead present the "necessity of making the journey in order to do historical research on video games" (p. 27). As such, the detail encountered as each page unfolds is rich, meaningful, and fully considered as the spaces in between each excursion were clearly used to reflect upon the sites of enquiry and the subsequent presentation of the wealth of material gathered along the way.

Starting inside the museum in Chapter 1, the reader is presented with a mixture of Guins' own object ethnographies along with interviews with the curators and archivists in museums who work with presenting video games to visitors on a daily basis. What are the challenges and questions posed by "preserving an interactive electronic medium […] that also runs against the prevalent policy of the museum as a place for not-touching"? (p. 35). Dedicated museum sites such as the Strong National Museum of Play, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History , and the Computer History Museum offer unique insights into their dedicated collections, how they choose to understand the video game as an artefact, and how it isn't always possible to have playable machines. Although examples such as the display of PacMan are repeated in places throughout, they remind the reader of the multiple means of displaying such complex material objects and associated interactions. Moving on from the display of video game artefacts the end of Chapter 1 takes us into the related archives of these institutions. Behind the closed doors of general visitor access, Guins exposes the challenges in maintaining these archival spaces and the joys they can reveal as his own photographs of archival cabinets expose as much about these areas as the text itself; objects "laid to rest" but not forgotten (p.69).

Beyond the formal archive of these institutions, Chapter 2 continues with our understanding of collecting video games in other scenarios, such as the university departments teaching game histories. Guins' own experiences of developing the William A. Higinbotham Game Studies Collection at Stony Brook evolves out of his own enquiry of how to teach and continue to develop game history classes beyond collecting, displaying and students playing games on original platforms across the span of home console development. Here, Guins questions how we trace histories with the few fragments that have been left behind.

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Photo of findings from a dig into the Atari landfill. Credit: Jason *CC BY 2.0*

Picking up the fragments of such histories similarly sees Guins travel to Alamogordo in New Mexico to interview those that remember the now infamous Atari landfill site – a mass burial of unsold video game cartridges and consoles in a New Mexico landfill site in 1983 (see Chapter 5). The intimacy of his research methods are revealed through personal anecdotes, such as his advertisement in a local paper asking to interview local people about their recollections of the site, and the serendipitous fortunes some of these journeys subsequently create. His style of prose invites you to read further, whilst retaining academic merit throughout the links to scholars writing in areas connected to material culture, media archaeology, ephemera, video game culture and museum studies amongst others.

It is Guins' multi-disciplinary approach to studying the after life of games which makes this book suitable for a wide audience: cultural institutions, historians and curators; those who collect, cherish, and restore digital content in less formal settings; and media, cultural, and game studies scholars. Despite the book's North American focus, the research presented in *Game After* is only the beginning of the video game afterlife, giving those that warrant it the means and methods of being able to interpret video games in a variety of forms as these cultures continue to develop, grow, and become sites for further enquiry for many years to come.

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Alison Gazzard is a Lecturer in Media Arts at the Institute of Education, University of London and has published research on video game spaces and time, location-based media and British computer game histories. Follow her on twitter @boundedspace. Read more reviews by Alison.

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